**The Civil Rights Movement – a summary**

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**A summary of the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement in the US**

**Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas**

In May 1954, following the *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case, the US Supreme Court ruled that segregation of public schools was unconstitutional. Oliver Brown, a father of a school-aged child, challenged the law that stated he had to send his daughter to an all-black school much further away than the local, all-white school. The Supreme Court agreed and concluded: “In the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place” referring to and overturning the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case that had permitted separate but equal facilities.

But with no fixed timetable, and with the Southern states in no hurry to implement the ruling, the court was obliged to follow up, a year later, with an order that schools must integrate “with all deliberate speed”. School buses ‘bussed’ school children sometimes considerable distances to ensure integration and 15 years later, in 1969, the Supreme Court had to intervene again when many schools had still to desegregate. (See also article on the Sweatt v Painter case, 1950).

**Emmett Till**

[](http://www.historyinanhour.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Rosa-Parks.jpg)In August 1955, a 14-year-old black boy, Emmett Till, was mutilated and murdered by white racists in Mississippi. His crime – “disrespecting” a white woman. His killers were controversially found not guilty by a white jury. Later, safe from retrial on the double jeopardy ruling, the killers admitted their guilt and sold their stories to the press, much to national outrage.

**The Montgomery Bus Boycott**

On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, 42-year-old Rosa Parks, seated in a segregated bus, refused to give up her seat to a white man. The bus driver called the police and Parks was arrested. Parks (pictured) was the local secretary of NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People)and the branch had been looking for an opportunity to stage a boycott of the city’s buses. The opportunity now presented itself and the boycott duly started on December 5. The [Montgomery boycott](http://www.historyinanhour.com/2012/12/01/the-montgomery-bus-boycott-summary/) was led by a 26-year-old recently appointed Baptist Reverend by the name of [Martin Luther King, Jr](http://www.historyinanhour.com/2011/04/04/293/).

Lasting a year the boycott caused the Montgomery blacks much hardship and inconvenience but eventually the city’s buses, so reliant on its black customers, relented. In November 1956 the Supreme Court declared segregation on public transport to be illegal and a month later, on December 21, stepping on board the first non-segregated bus in Montgomery was the Reverend King.

Inspired by the non-confrontational approach adopted by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr spoke for the rising black consciousness of 1950s black America. “The objective,” said King, “was not to coerce but to correct; not to break bodies or wills but to move hearts.”

**The ‘Little Rock Nine’**

In September 1957 nine black students tried to enrol at the recently desegregated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. The State Governor ordered in the Arkansas National Guard to keep them out. Finally, after three weeks of picketing and escalating tension, President Eisenhower dispatched federal troops to escort the ‘Little Rock Nine’ to class. Televised throughout America, it showed the stark reality of racial injustice still prevalent within its borders.

Eisenhower’s attitude towards civil rights however was lukewarm, at best, and one month before the 1960 presidential election it was his Democratic opponent that stole the lead on civil rights. During a sit-in in Atlanta, King was arrested and sentenced to four months hard labour. It was John F. Kennedy that rang King’s wife and his brother, Robert, not Eisenhower, that pulled the strings and had King’s sentence reversed. With the black vote now in his favour, Kennedy went on to win the election of November 1960.

**The Student Sit-ins**

Black students throughout the South extended their non-violent protests by organising sit-ins. In February 1960 four students in Greensboro, North Carolina were denied service in a segregated diner. Refusing to leave, they were threatened and insulted, but, determined they should be served, they returned the following day, and again throughout the week. Students, both black and white, joined their protest, prepared to sit in dignified silence whilst mobs jeered, poked and smeared ketchup and mustard in their hair.

But the protests continued, rapidly spreading across the South, affecting restaurants, hotels, shops, libraries, beaches and most public facilities. Television cameras tracked the story as the tension escalated, and families throughout America and abroad watched with horror the unfolding indignities and intimidation happening in the land of the free.

In 1962 President Kennedy had to order troops to assist James Meredith, a young black man, enrol at the University of Mississippi. In September, the Governor of Mississippi, Ross Barnett, physically blocked Meredith’s entrance to the university. The following month Meredith tried again, this time with the aid of Kennedy’s federal enforcement. The ensuing riots saw two killed and over 160 injured. Meredith finally took his place and having suffered a year of racism and intimidation, graduated in August 1963 with a degree in political science.

**Freedom Rides**

Whilst state-run segregated buses had been declared illegal, inter-state bus facilities remained segregated. In May 1961 protestors embarked on the Freedom Rides, organised by CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality). They were met with civil disturbances and violence throughout the South as white mobs attacked the buses. In Montgomery the governor of Alabama refused to send the State Guard to protect the passengers and Robert Kennedy had to order in federal troops to break-up the increasingly violent scenes. But finally, effective from November 1, 1961, inter-state bus services were desegregated.

**Letter from Birmingham Jail**

May 1963, in Birmingham, Alabama, saw a major protest against the city’s segregation policies. The city’s police used dogs and fire hoses against the peaceful demonstrators, that included women and children. 3,000 were arrested, amongst them, King, his thirteenth arrest. From his cell, King used scrap pieces of paper and margins of newspapers to write a 7,000-word open letter on the moral issues of the civil rights movement. Known as the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, it included the line, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”.

On June 11, 1963, President Kennedy spoke on national television about the need for civil rights: “Legislation cannot solve this problem alone. It must be solved in the home of every American.” Within a few days Kennedy had presented Congress a sweeping raft of civil rights legislation which despite its moral necessity required greater Federal power at the expense of State power. It was perhaps asking too much. Civil rights leaders, realising the potential for its failure, decided, against Kennedy’s advice, to organise a huge demonstration to pressurise Congress into passing the bill.

**[](http://www.historyinanhour.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/I-Have-a-Dream.jpg)The March on Washington**

On August 28, 1963, 250,000 people took part in the ‘March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom’. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial Joan Baez led the singing of the song that had become the anthem of the civil rights movement, *We Shall Overcome*, and Bob Dylan sang *Blowin’ In The Wind*. The marchers, black and white, young and old, rich and poor, a complete cross section of society, listened as King proclaimed, “I have a dream”(pictured): “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.”

**The 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing**

A mere month later, in Birmingham, Alabama, four white supremacists detonated a bomb at a [Baptist Church](http://www.historyinanhour.com/2011/09/15/the-16th-street-baptist-church-bombing/) popular with African Americans. Twenty were injured but tragically four young girls, aged 11 to 14, were killed in the explosion. After a series of bungled investigations into the Birmingham Church Bombing, involving blocked evidence and malpractices, the last of the four killers was finally convicted in 2002. It had taken almost four decades.

**The Civil Rights Bill**

On November 22, 1963, [Kennedy was assassinated](http://www.historyinanhour.com/2012/11/22/assassination-of-john-f-kennedy-summary/). Lyndon B Johnson, appointed his successor, prioritised the Civil Rights bill, which, on July 2, 1964, was passed. Segregation in public facilities was now illegal as was to discriminate on the basis of race, colour, religion or country of origin. The Civil Rights Movement had taken another substantial step forward.

[](http://www.historyinanhour.com/2011/12/07/black-history-history-in-an-hour/)Rupert Colley.  
Read more in [***Black History: History In An Hour***](http://www.historyinanhour.com/2011/12/07/black-history-history-in-an-hour/).

Rupert Colley’s novella, [***My Brother the Enemy***](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/B00B5W87VG/petewill-20), set during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, is now available.

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